Disentangling from Communism. Poland's Feminist Literary Studies Struggling for Acceptability

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Abstract: The 1989 collapse of the Polish socialist system had several impacts on the country's gender discourse. Not only did the winners of the situation voice the return to a „normal" gender order, but also the legal grounds shifted with the ban on abortion in 1993 and the dismissal of a parity law in 2003. Even though this backlash evoked social movements and academic interest in gender issues, these new initiatives faced oppositions: Feminism was strongly connoted with communism, a bogey which had only just been expelled. In order to avoid being overly stigmatised, academic research developed strategies to partly adapt to current social discourses. As the feminist literary discourse developed, theoretical inputs were brought in from the so-called West. This helped to distance research from „Soviet" state feminism branded ideologically intolerable. The exchange of the term ‚feminism' by ‚gender', the latter perceived as more objective and ideologically unsuspicious, helped „gender studies" to take off academically. Nonetheless, reservations as to the objectivity of scholarly output might be more present in post-socialist societies. Furthermore, the topic of socialism or this epoch's literature were avoided wholly in feminist literary studies. Instead, research interest was directed to the more distant past, e.g. the interwar period, by which means feminist thought was located in the Polish past itself. These strategies positioned feminist scholars in a debate about the national past, present, and future of society. In order not to argue beyond acknowledgement, in some respects feminists followed neoliberal, individualist discourses, calling not so much for a strong „common female consciousness" but rather for individual, liberal solutions. These theses will be elaborated by drawing upon text material from literary studies, aided by recent critical voices in Poland's feminism.

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Disentangling from Communism.
Poland's Feminist Literary Studies Struggling for Acceptability

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When socialism came to a fall around 1990, the emerging societies were confronted with political and economic changes leading also to a high social instability. In postsocialist Poland of the 1990s, these instabilities invoked a conservative backlash concerning gender models. At the same time, feminist thought gains strength both in political activism and academic research. However, the transformation from a socialist state to a West-oriented, neoliberal society poses several specific, intersecting problems with which the recent feminist movement has to deal. In order to embed feminism in the Polish society, certain concessions to the dominating discourse are made, while other strategies work to deconstruct and transform popular narratives. In the following article, this fusing of feminist agenda with neoliberal mainstream will be examined on the basis of gender oriented publications in Polish studies of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Transformational Backlash

Poland transformed from a socialist to a democratic state and market economy in 1989. Alongside the economic and political change, social and cultural discourses transformed as well. The struggle for freedom from the socialist system had been the dominating cause of the 1980s, leaving almost no discursive space for other engagements. Also for most women, the liberation of the people as such was the only justifiable commitment, and the few feminist voices remained unheard (Borkowska, 2013: 4; Janion, 1996: 326). However, the democratic transformation did not result – as was secretly hoped for – in an equal and free society without discriminations (Graff, 2005: 17; Janion, 1996; 326f.). Gender norms perceived as „traditional" gained in strength and resulted in the stricter division of spheres belonging to either men (public) or women (private). These tendencies were supported and reinforced by the influential Catholic church, which had played a significant role in the pre-transformational opposition and could now elaborate its relevance in a destabilised society. The nuclear family gained new importance, tying the woman closer to reproductive duties. By 1993, the previously legal abortion was banned. This curtailment of women's right of self-determination evoked larger protests and helped to form a women's movement (Walczewska, 2005: 5–20; Chołuj, 1998: 122; Fuchs, 2003: 142), which had beforehand existed only on the margins. Many women came to realise that the so-called liberation of the Polish people did not automatically include women, and that there had to be fought yet another struggle (Janion, 1996: 327). Literary and scholarly publications started to appear, engaging with gender roles in Polish society and literature.

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It has been argued that the abortion law of 1993, and also the following dismissal of parity law in 2003 were not due to conservative tendencies in politics alone, but were rather influenced by a strong anti-communist conservatism present in society. Feminists underline the Machiavellian attitude many politicians had towards gender issues, as former communist ministers dismissed women's rights to express their commitment to the dominating popular traditionalism. By joining in this conservative discourse, they were able to keep their post. Furthermore, the abortion law – pushed on by Catholic circles – was a matter of quick resolution and results, whilst a heap of more urgent, but complex and seemingly insolvable problems waited to be dealt with (Chołuj, 2013: 3; Graff, 2005: 19; Mizielińska, 2011: 87f.). Social traditionalism with respect to gender roles and political Machiavellism allied against the right of female self-determination. It is even more telling that the dismissal of a parity law was agreed with the Catholic church in exchange for its support in the 2003 referendum for EU membership (Chołuj, 2013: 4).

Communist Connotations and Feminist Repulsion

Feminism and parity were – at least nominally – transported by the socialist state. Gender equality was established in law, women were to a large extent integrated in the workforce, and daycare for children reached historic levels. This of course does not necessarily mean that women did not experience discrimination at work or in the political sphere. People were still subdued to a number of institutional and social mechanisms preventing equal rights and chances for all genders (Fidelis, 2010: passim).

The socialist attempts at creating gender equality were narratively exploited after the transformation of 1989. In neotraditional discourse, the effort to abolish gender hierarchies was viewed as one of the main reasons for the claimed inhumanity of the socialist system. The socialist „feminisation" was depicted as turning men into passive weaklings, as citizens were restricted from the public sphere and the political, and obliged to act primarily in private spaces not directly penetrated by the state. Personal initiative was framed by strict rules or then transferred solely to underground culture. The post-transformational traditionalist discourse viewed this perceived immobilisation of society's dynamics as an effect of a feminocratic socialist system, which was then accused of having turned the gender order upside down (Graff, 2005: 23; also Fidelis, 2010: 229f.). Therefore, after the transformation the only „natural", patriarchal order should be reinstalled in order to return to a functional society.

The discursive fusing of communism and feminism in Poland and in other post-socialist states had an immense impact on women's movement. In most people's minds, feminism was linked to the grey, depressing and repressing times of the Polish People's Republic. Therefore the feminists of the 1990s were often regarded as threatening the only just gained political freedom and suspected of wanting to subjugate the people to yet another ideological system. According to these suspicions, feminists were met with social disapproval (Iwasiów, 2013: 9). Even though the term „feminism" was therefore a very negatively perceived label, most women engaged in the struggle for equal rights nonetheless adhered to this naming. They tried to elude the disadvantageous connotation by other means, including an implicit disregard for communism and the embracing of a neoliberal agenda.

A common narrative of the 1990s' feminists was to object to the notion of communist feminism. Feminism was depicted as having been co-opted and instrumentalised by the socialist system, without the latter showing any real effort to install gender equality. The gender equality claimed by socialism was – and mostly still is – perceived to be only an etiquette, a hollow promise of equality (Kałwa, 2009: 175, 185; Mrozik, 2012: 389f.). Thus, the post-transformational feminist's narrative would conclude, the contemporary feminist movement could not be regarded as identical to what had been presented as feminism in the Polish People's Republic. Contemporary feminism would rather represent a break with the socialist feminist agenda and deny common traditions. The focus of interest of the post-transformational feminism shifted onto different matters, underlining its contrariness and thereby cutting the bonds to leftist thought (Mrozik, 2012: 388). Socialist feminism had been mainly concerned with so-called materialist or economist topics – education, workforce, daycare etc. – related to women's integration into productive forces. Research on gender topics focused mainly on proceedings in quotas and were represented in quantitative measurements (Chołuj, 2013: 2; Fuchs, 2003: 61f.; Kałwa, 2009: passim). Therefore, turning the issue upside down and strengthening qualitative analyses concentrating on cultural aspects constituted a differing way of handling feminist requests. In this light the vanguard position of philological works on gender in the 1990s needs hardly be explained. Research turned onto discourse analyses in literature and, to some extent, in (literary) historiography. Notions of culture and discourse became leading in the new studies on social and literary norms and myths. This culturalist turn in Polish feminist thought was moreover supported by the accelerated transfer of Western theories in the 1990s. The introduced poststructuralist ideas were received by many scholars in Poland as an overwhelming novelty and a tool of methodological liberation (Borkowska, 2013: 6; Kraskowska, 2013: 4).

Shifting Focuses in Polish Studies

It is revealing to take a closer look at these dynamics by examining feminist philological works of 1990s' Poland. Especially publications in Polish studies shed a light onto the intersection of feminist thought with literary studies, national historiography, and social discourse; therefore this article will concentrate upon Polish feminist literary criticism. In the 1990s, feminist publications in Polish studies focused their research mainly on literary material from the Second Polish Republic's interwar period (1918–1939) and from the times of the Partition of Poland (1795–1918). The epoch of the Partition, in literary historical terms especially Polish Romanticism, played a key role in the forming of a national identity and introduced a highly gendered cultural symbolic order even though Poland did not exist as a country at this stage. In the interwar period's female writings on the other hand, scholars discovered rather elaborate feminist thought and realised that women had to struggle with much the same issues as today (Iwasiów, 2013: 10).

In pointing out these findings, post-transformational feminists were enabled to claim the Polish roots of feminist thought and to argue against a sole imposition of feminism by Soviet communism – or by the West, as a more recent conservative accusation implies. By focusing on literature from before World War II, contemporary feminists moreover omitted the tackling of socialist literary production. This silencing

of socialist literature could be interpreted as expressing disregard for communist conceptions and deleting them as possibly interesting fields of feminist research and inspiration. The contemporary reality was therefore tied back immediately to the interwar period. This relates to the metaphor of the socialist era as a „freezer" of Polish society and culture, conserving it – despite or because its superficial freeze – at the core much the way it used to be until World War II. In this ignorance of the socialist epoch, gender publications followed the mainstream historical interest. The Second Polish Republic became fetishised in conservative discourses as a reference for the national consciousness to be modelled upon. This discursive returning to an earlier period is a symptom of both suppressed reappraisal of historical events like the Warsaw Uprising's collective trauma in Polish socialist historiography *and* the post-transformational unwillingness to deal with the more recent past in a serious way. The discursive fusing of past epochs with the contemporary reality hints not only at the possibility of non-linear, cyclical developments, but also at the epochal shift in the reviewing of historical events. This shift seems to be due to efforts of breaking off from the more recent past by avoiding any discussion about it.

Reclaiming the Past

The existence of feminist thought in the pre-socialist period was of some importance to feminist scholars. It came in handy to demonstrate that feminism was not *per se* connected to communism or – even more importantly – an imposed Soviet institution, even though many interwar feminists experimented with leftist and socialist ideas. More than that, contemporary feminists stressed the alignment of interwar feminist thought to the social norms of the Second Polish Republic. These early writings turn out to be quite valuable for post-transformational feminists, because they touch upon similar matters, topics which are still (or again) disturbing today. By pointing out these feminist agendas of the past, contemporary feminism is positioned in a century-old tradition and presented as its continuation, even though it might have been distorted during the 50 years of the People's Republic. By tracing these historical relations, today's feminists not only deconstruct the notion of feminism as a neophyte; they also complement the historiography of these times. Reviving the feminist authors of the interwar period is intended to counter the national-conservative patriarchal discourse arising after the 1989's transformation. It shows the historical discourse focusing solely on the Polish past's patriarchal constitution as an ideological exclusion of differing voices designed to create a specific image of the past. On these images rests largely the transformation and reconstruction of social and cultural discourse in the 1990s. It turns out to be more than relevant to have a say in the process of historiographical reviewing by feminist interfering with mainstream narratives (Wierzbicki, 1984: 94; Janion, 2006: 7, 329).

For example, a national-messianistic narrative, of which the fetishisation of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is one expression, has found its way into Polish public consciousness once again. The Warsaw Uprising figures in conservative discourses as a historical example of the extraordinary capacity of the Polish people to bear suffering at the hands of external powers and is narrated as a martyriologic sacrifice for greater justice and humanity – by trying single-handedly to abolish Nazi occupation in Warsaw in 1944. By insisting on such „sacrifices", this narrative smugly

constructs the Polish nation as devoid of historical sin. Simultaneously, this hierarchisation of „national consciences“ respectively the discursive installing of Poland on top of such a hierarchy implies that no-one should interfere with the nation's fate any more, or try to impose e.g. moral bindings upon the Polish society. The convincing power of this narrative is illustrated by the EU's informal recognition of the Polish patriarchal system as a national specificity worth protecting (Chołuj, 2013: 4).

By researching the presence of early emancipatory movements and outstanding female figures in Poland, feminists show that Poland's history is not „naturally“ or „genuinely“ more patriarchal than that of other countries. Poland seemed even to possess relatively liberal social norms before World War I: as the future transgender writer Maria Komornickas notes, coming to England in 1894 let her realise that the Polish misogyny she despised was comparably harmless (Janion, 1996: 253ff). Understandably, feminist research focuses often on the most outstanding and vanguard figures; sometimes feminist studies seem even tempted to reassert Poland's past exceptionality in the opposite, philogynist sense (Kałwa, 2014: 123). Such a narrative can also be found in Romantic writings, as they stress the (symbolic) importance and respect women dispose of in Polish society (Janion, 1996: 96–99).

Embracing Neoliberalist Individualism

Apart from the involvement with the pre-socialist past, post-transformational feminists could also focus on contemporary times. Connotations with communism were tried to avoid by joining prevailing discourses and focusing on the affiliation with the European West. The „West“, for many years an object of longing, suddenly drew in closer. It seemed possible to *become* Western. Historical discourses in Poland have rarely claimed the country or its people to be anything other than European (Wierzbicki, 1984: passim, e.g. 124). However, the 20th century had split Poland from its cultural reference point, leaving it prey to the Soviet „East“. But even during the integration in the „Eastern bloc“, Poland had fostered a rather strong national narrative and positioned itself discursively at or even beyond the margins of the community of socialist states. With the transformation of 1989, Poland finally seemed free to join the West again. To achieve admission, however, the so-called progress level was supposed to catch up with the idolised Western countries' conditions. Thus economy, political order, civil society and culture were moulded into new shapes following Western models. In academia, the immediate import of Western socio-political and philosophical thought led to a „knotting“ and „looping“ of different times and theories (Kulpa, Mizielińska, 2011: 15).

The possibilities of theoretical and methodological approaches multiplied, leading to new patterns of thinking about social reality and culture. The transferred theories were perceived as a way to emancipate from socialist-informed structuralism, perceived often as „dry“, „restrictive“, and „impersonal“ (Borkowska, 2013: 1; Iwasiów, 2013: 1). Many scholars started experimenting with new paradigms, rejoicing in the newly discovered methodological liberties.

The orientation on Western models led also to the implementation of a neoliberal market system, inaugurated by a so-called economic shock therapy.

In the wake of economic liberalisation, factories and enterprises were privatised, social care cut down and civil organisations cut off from funding. Women were more likely to be dismissed from work as workplaces dwindled in number and institutional childcare support diminished. Many of them had to take on precarious jobs or stay at home (Chołuj, 1998: 122; Chołuj, 2013: 6; Fuchs, 2003: 113–144 passim). Besides workplace disintegration, women were hit by a social, political and juridical backlash regarding gender roles.

Feminists had to tackle these problems while being framed by a double bind. In order to address the discriminations experienced by women as a structural problem related to the construction of gender oppositions, feminists would have to speak in the name of „women" and to „women" in their attempt to raise consciousness. However, the transferred feminist writings showed that to refer to a consistent category of women was considered outdated, as it represented an unacceptable hegemonic generalisation. What was more, the image of „the women" as an united interest group standing up for their rights would remind most Poles of class struggle, ergo communism, and lead to immediate rejection of such a concept (Graff, 2006: 39; Iwasiów, 2013: 9). In trying to elude communist connotations and simultaneously close in on the West, referring to a category of women was hence twofold unreasonable.

What was more, in the Polish People's Republic hardly any awareness of gendered discrimination could be found; gender structures were not considered to be of political relevance, and feminist tendencies were barely existent. Women were regarded and regarded themselves one part of the people (Fuchs, 2003: 57; Graff, 2005: 17f). The rift between „us" – the people – and „them" – the socialist system – was so powerful it did not leave space for discussion of further differentiations by intersecting axes. When after 1989 women were increasingly discriminated, the link to gendered hierarchical structuring had first to be established; only slowly a consciousness emerged of a certain imposed connection among women. But even if the consciousness of gendered exclusion grew, it was difficult to address. Still a feminist movement embracing women as a group was regarded as highly suspicious. Individualism was inaugurated together with the neoliberal agenda, and this trend continued in societal and cultural conceptions. The individual subject and its freedom from potential bindings tying it back to a larger category of people moved into the focus of social discourse (Ghodsee, 2004: 727; Iwasiów, 2004: 82).

In the light of these developments, feminist thought in Polish studies was enchanted by individualistic concepts, too. Even though a female counterworld was imagined in some examples, it was not thought of as a sphere of commonality but world of one's own, an intimate, individual withdrawal from patriarchy to find solace in inner strength (Iwasiów, 2004: 74).

Transported by literature, it could be shared spiritually among women; however, it was not supposed to establish a political agenda or a common request for social change.

Furthermore, Polish feminists explored the often so-called postfeminist calls for a new femininity. It was OK to care for external outlooks, underlining one's feminine traits in the light of female empowerment and of caring about one's own well-being. It should express one's own desire to look or behave a certain way instead of fulfilling socio-normal prescriptions regarding gender identities (Graff, 2005: 176–194, esp. 179).

Even this turn to feminine beauty could be seen in the light of a rejection of communist connotations, since the socialist past was linked discursively to greyness and suppressed joy. This gloomy picture was reinforced by framing feminists as man-hating, anti-pleasure, unfeminine women – just like „old-school" feminists in Western mainstream discourse. Even though it might not exactly be their intent, both these phenomenons – a literary counterworld and the call for a new femininity – can be interpreted as a retreat from an omnipresent anti-socialist disregard for feminism, focusing on the empowerment and self-esteem of the individual women (Mrozik, 2012: 17). In a way, especially the focus on femininity could also be read as a veiling of feminist views.

Theatre of Terms: Veiling and Unveiling Feminism

The application of feminist thought to mainstream social discourse was not the sole problem feminists faced in the 1990s – and face until today. In academia just like in society, the term feminism was usually regarded with suspicion and deemed as ideologically overloaded. The humanities had only just proceeded to research supposedly unrestricted by ideology, so they were eager to deny argumentative space for feminism as a suspected socialist relict (Iwasiów, 2013: 9). Accordingly, scholars interested in feminist literary criticism and intent on giving classes tried rather to avoid the term „feminism" for course descriptions. Instead, some referred just to women as the category of research; others pointed out *płeć* (gender/sex) as their studies' interest. Quite popular however was also the introduction of the term „gender". The appeal of this term was its semantic opacity; hardly anyone outside the feminist circles knew what meaning it transported. Moreover, it was persuasively Western with its English sound and catchy shortness. Connected to Western academia, „gender" seemed thoroughly scientific and devoid of ideological ballast. For some time, it was a convincing strategy to hide behind the veils of this term to cover for the actual research or teaching (Iwasiów, 2013: 12). More often than not, women and female literature were the sole focus of studies, letting the term not quite live up to its implications. Masculinity was integrated into research around the year 2000, hand in hand with a growing interest in sexuality and queer studies (Kraskowska, 2013: 1; Kulpa, Mizielińska, 2011: 14), but also with the perception of gender as a form of power structuring and the question about the construction of such categories and hierarchies.

In these past years, mainly since 2013, a definite end has come to the term „gender" being unsuspicious in Poland. Before feminist scholars or activists could establish their interpretations of the term, the Catholic church rendered it infamous. Ironically enough, the mechanism of terminological obscurity still functions and is exhausted by this new backlash. Differently from feminist uses of the term, leaving it relatively open and allowing for varying understandings, the conservative discourse has quite a set opinion of what „gender" transports and tries to disguise: it is a veil for a conspiracy set to destroy the traditional Polish society by attacking its most precious unity, the family. The conspiracy, called „gender ideology" consists of aggressive communist feminists in alliance with the decadent West, i.e. the EU (Iwasiów, 2013: 8f.; Mizielińska, 2001: 87; Oko, 2013: 40–43). Once again, the destructive forces are not of Polish origin.

Conservatives reproaching academia of ideological manipulation in Poland are in history's favour. Universities in former socialist states have been involved in processing state-recommended paradigms and producing conformist theories, even if not only. Therefore academic research has partly been regarded as belonging to „them" in opposition to the suppressed people. The rift between academia and society might therefore be deeper than in „Western" countries, where academia is traditionally rather perceived as „objective" and devoid of ideological backdrop, even though this assumption can be questioned equally. This (post)socialist distrust of the „common citizen" regarding academic output in Poland comes in handy for the deliberate reinforcement of anti-feminist prejudices and the portrayal of gender studies as ideological manipulation.

„Gender" has by now taken on a quite diverging meaning in everyday Poland: the term is not used as a „category referring to the sociocultural character of gender norms and their relations" (Krasuska, 2014: 155). In mainstream discourse, „gender" nowadays denotes the „ideology" as a political conspiracy organised by feminists. Therefore, if we can read on a banner in a local political meeting, „Gender destroys Poland! Gender – stop", this most definitely does not mean a positioning against discriminating gender roles still present in Polish society. Instead it contains a performative attempt to push „gender" – i.e. gender studies, feminism – out of the Polish society by treating it as a alien element. This performative clearing of the national narrative from interfering „gender ideology" delegitimises emancipatory movements exactly because they are presented as coming from outside. The struggle in the end is still about whether it is „ours" or „theirs".

Conclusion

The debates about gender equality and gender research in Poland have taken on – if we were to believe media coverage – an urgency of life or death for the nation. The discussions are closely linked to both the socialist past and the nation's contemporary positioning in relation to – mainly – its Western neighbours and new allies. In times of rapid social and economic changes the gender issue is stylised as *the* argument between conservative and progressive forces. While the voices against „gender ideology" stick to a rather narrow definition of their declared „enemy", rotating around the corruption of the nuclear family and „natural" sexuality, gender studies themselves have in the past years revived interest in the socialist era and begun to critique a one-sided Western line of thought and hoped-for progress (Iwasiów, Galant, 2011; Mrozik, 2012: 18). Academic research thrives and diversifies, and gender mainstreaming shows its effects in society even while media still dwell on „gender ideology".

In the meantime, another popular reproach has emerged: whether feminists „do enough" and „what they should", playing off political activism and concrete social change against academic gender studies (Waloch-Matlakiewicz, 2015). It seems that precarious economic circumstances have led a wider public to the realisation that something must be done to prevent gendered discrimination.

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DOĞU AKDENİZ ÜNİVERSİTESİ

CALL FOR PAPER

The Fifth International Gender Studies Conference, which will be held in Famagusta, North Cyprus on March 25 – 27, 2015 by the Center for Women's Studies of the Eastern Mediterranean University, aims at bringing together scholars, researchers, performers and activists from various disciplines to present their works and exchange ideas on a wide range of issues such as economics, sociology, psychology, politics, law, communications, art, and a variety of disciplines under the general theme of "Neoliberal Discourse and Gender Equality". Neo-liberal discourse and policies require us to think about the problematic relation of the state-civil society-individual from multi-dimensional perspectives. Therefore, our conference aims at opening the relation between gender identity and neoliberal discourse and policies to discussion with respect to patriarchy, feminist theory, queer theory, social justice, political participation, sexuality, media, education and human rights.

The conference will be held over three days at Eastern Mediterranean University Conference and Culture Center and will explore the following themes:

Neoliberal Discourse and Policies:

- Patriarchy
- Feminist Theory
- Queer Theory
- Women's Movement
- Social Justice
- Immigration
- Political Participation
- Women Labor
- Women's Health
- Body and Sexuality
- Education Policy
- The Media
- Human Rights
- Women's Human Rights
- Art
- Women's History
- Space

http://cws.emu.edu.tr/NDGE2015

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